DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 683 FL 022 633

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TITLE Peaking at Zero: Null Subjects and Other Indicators of Peak in Konni Texts.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *African Languages; Discourse Analysis; *Folk Culture; Form Classes (Languages); Grammar; Intonation; Language Patterns; Language Research; Linguistic Theory; Pronouns; Sentence Structure; *Story Grammar; *Story Telling; Uncommonly Taught Languages; Verbs
IDENTIFIERS *Gur Languages

ABSTRACT

An analysis of story telling in Konni, a language spoken in Ghana, focused on how the climax of a story is characterized. The texts studied are six oral folk tales; two are appended, and portions of all are used as illustrations in the text of the report. First, the definition and characteristics of "peak," or climax of a story are discussed. This phenomenon is described as a "zone of turbulence" in which normal patterns of narrative discourse are skewed. Characteristics of peak specific to Konni are then described. These include atypical use of the particle for "then," the three discourse marker functions of one verb, a concentration of verbs at peak, changes in anaphoric reference (null subject clauses, absence of pronouns, and shift from nonhuman to human pronouns), appearance of direct quotations and dialogue, and increase in pitch and amplitude of speech. (MSE)

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Peaking At Zero:
Null Subjects and Other Indicators of Peak in Kɔnni Texts

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1. Introduction

Kɔnni, or Kɔmɪŋ, is an SVO language spoken by approximately 2300 Koma people in northern Ghana. It belongs to the Gur family, Western Oti-Volta branch (Naden 1989). Published information about the language is limited to Naden (1987) and Cahill (1992a,b), as well as a few words in Naden (1988, 1989).

This paper investigates how peak, the climax or high point of a story characterized by a "zone of turbulence" (Longacre 1983:25), is manifested in Kɔnni.

The texts that this study is based on are oral folk tales, taped in the village of Yikpabongo, transcribed and translated by Mr. Ben Saibu, a native Kɔnni speaker, and slightly edited by me. The texts are "Spider and Monkey" (SM), "Hippo and Elephant" (HE), "Lion and Wolf" (LW), "Tortoise and Spider" (TS), "Spider and Elephant" (SE), and "Bad Soup" (BS). The first two are included as appendices, while portions of the others are referred to below as relevant.

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2. Definition and Characteristics of Peak

A story, at least a moderately-well-told story, is not uniform in its level of tension throughout the whole narrative. Typically, an introduction of some sort is low in tension. This sets the stage, introduces the main characters, and so forth. After this, there are various incidents which move the plot along, each of which builds and may release some tension, until the climax of the story is reached, when the tension is at its maximum and the problems that have been building are on the verge of being resolved.

A "peak," in Longacre's terminology, is the *surface* manifestation of the *underlying* notion of climax. He describes it as a "zone of turbulence" where the normal patterns of narrative discourse are skewed. By grammatical, semantic, phonological, and vocabulary prominences in surface structure, the hearer or reader is given cues that the climax of the story is about to happen or is in progress. Among other surface indicators, there is often a concentration of participants ("crowded stage"), heightened vividness, change of pace, out-of-the-ordinary verb tenses or aspects, and occurrence of special particles (Longacre 1983:25-38). Several surface indications of peak are found in Kɔnni, and these will be examined in turn below.

As we shall see, some of these indicators of peak are used nearly universally in Kɔnni discourse, while others seem to be a part of a storyteller's "bag of tricks" that he may or may not use. The following are a mere scratching of the surface; most could be expanded considerably.

3. Characteristics of Peak in Kɔnni Text

3.1 Atypical use of dɪ 'then'

The particle dɪ 'then' is often used in Kɔnni to introduce a new paragraph, for example, to indicate that a new sort of action is coming, or a different character is now the subject; dɪ indicates a shift in action of some sort. In six stories examined, dɪ occurs 55 times. Of these, approximately 42 occurrences open paragraphs. This is almost half of the total paragraphs. Dɪ as a paragraph marker indicates a new thing is happening, moving the story line along. When the listener hears "then," he knows something on the main story line is coming, not just amplification or background material. In the first part of "Spider and Monkey," for example, dɪ opens paragraphs in sentences 11, 20, and 31, fairly well spread apart.

However, in the last episode of "Spider and Monkey," when tension is building up, dɪ starts occurring more frequently, in sentences 37 and 39. Then in the last paragraph of this episode, at the peak of the action, dɪ occurs in three out of five sentences (43-47). The effect on the hearer is that events are happening fast and furious. To compare in another way, dɪ occurs once in the first major episode, twice in the second episode, but five times in the third, climactic, episode.

In "Hippo and Elephant" there is also a sequence of three sentences with dɪ at the peak of action (14-16). The other stories also have dɪ more frequently at peaks.

Interestingly, the use of dɪ may be one measure of how well a storyteller tells his story. "The Lion and the Wolf" has an interesting plot line, but doesn't have the neat structure of other stories, and doesn't seem to be as well told, judging from reactions of other Kɔnni speakers. It has 10 uses of dɪ, and they are distributed rather evenly through the text, including two that seem not to be needed at all. The effect is of a little child saying "Then this happened, then this happened, then this happened..." By using dɪ so often, the storyteller loses the impact it might have. In contrast, a story called "Wolf and Strange House" uses dɪ sparingly throughout the story until the peak actions, where it occurs in three sentences in a row, more similar to the two stories appended here.

3.2 Verbal turbulence

3.2.1 The verb "hagɪ"

The verb hagɪ "get up" does not often function as a literal verb of "getting up," but does have three functions as a discourse marker. The first is to introduce the first main character or characters. In "Spider and Monkey" for example, the spider "got up" in sentence 3. This is not literal motion, but is as a rhetorical device for participant introduction, equivalent to "There once was a spider..."

The second function is to mark pivotal, inciting episodes of the story. For example, in "Spider and Monkey," the spider "got up" to trick the cow (sentence 26). In "Hippo and Elephant," the rabbit "got up" (sentence 5) and starts the incident that causes all the trouble.

Hagɪ also has a third function which is closely related to the second. This is concerned with peak, and we see examples in "Bad Soup" and "Lion and Wolf." In these stories, at peaks of action, the animals "get up" and run away:

(1) n zʊa a **hagɪ** pabap a chɪgɪ juu haagɪŋ.
*1s friend they **get.up** quickly they run enter bush*
'My friend, they ran off quickly into the bush.' (BS 79)

(2) bi-tal lɪɛn dɪ **haa** naa ke kuoliŋ ŋan ke siesi
*goat-male too then **get.up** take it gourd with it honey*
'Male goat also ran away with its gourd of honey.' (LW 32)

In these stories, hagɪ never indicates a literal "getting up," but in the peaks above, it is even more of a "dummy" verb. That is, it does not indicate any action, and could be omitted with no change of meaning of the sentence. However, the impact would be changed. As a dummy, it slows the rate of information flow, while keeping the words coming. The effect is like that of slow-motion in a motion

picture at a crucial moment. (I found the same phenomenon in two Nafaanra folk tales, also from Ghana, that I analyzed some years ago.)

3.2.2 Verbal concentration

As the tension level rises in the story, the number of verbs also increases. The use of hagɪ above is the most specific case I have found of a number of what look like, to Western eyes at least, "unnecessary" verbs. That is, more verbs are used at certain points than are strictly necessary to carry along the action. This is especially evident in SM 37, 38, 42, where the monkey is going around the bush and building the spider's frustration:

(3) ŋmaamɪŋ ŋaaŋ ga baarɪ naa ken tɪaŋ.
monkey would go go.round like.this come pass
'Monkey would go around and around like this.' (SM 37)

Here, the verbs 'go,' 'come,' and 'pass' could be omitted without any loss in meaning. However, there would be a definite loss in impact.

Another way of looking at verbal concentration is the number of verbs per sentence. As expected, this number rises at times of tension. For example, in "Spider and Monkey," there are ten sentences which have four or more verbs - sentences 14, 20, 21, 26, 33, 37, 38, 39, 42, and 47. Sentences 14, 26, and 33 introduce new episodes, and the rest of these are points of high tension - either a "mini-peak" with the spider killing someone, or the main peak in the case of the three consecutive sentences 37-39.

3.3 Anaphoric reference

3.3.1 Null subject clauses

Null subject clauses, where there is no overt subject, seem to occur only in connected discourse in Kɔnni. The referent is thus recoverable from the linguistic context, and is generally the subject of the immediately preceding sentence. However, the distribution of null-subjects is not random, but often tied to the tension of the moment. In particular, there is a greater concentration of null-subjects at peak or other times of rising or greater tension ("mini-peaks").

In "Hippo and Elephant," for example, there are seven null subjects. Of these, five are connected with points of high tension, either when the rabbit is stealthily tying the other two animals together, or when these animals are pulling against each other with all their might.

In "Spider and Monkey," out of 61 clauses, fourteen have null subjects, not counting the imperatives, in which subject deletion is obligatory. These tend to cluster around peak areas within episodes and especially in the peak of the whole story. In the episode with kaŋ 'bush.horse' (a type of big antelope), three null subjects occur when the bush-horse goes blind, is killed, and is taken away to be eaten. Similarly, in the episode with the cow, two null subjects occur when the cow is killed and taken away to be eaten. Again, in the most important episode, with the monkey, two null subjects occur at the end when the spider goes blind and

is killed. However, in addition, three null subjects occur earlier in the episode when the monkey is just going round and the tension and frustration of the spider is building. So ten of fourteen null subjects definitely occur at points of high tension, associated either with "mini-peaks" in episodes, or with the main peak. Interestingly, the four null subjects which do not directly correlate with peak are all at the beginning of the story.

Having null subjects (and null objects) are another way to increase the verbal concentration, along with the increase in the actual number of verbs mentioned above. Presumably this heightens the sense of fast action at peak and other high-tension points.

3.3.2 Absence of pronouns

In "Spider and Monkey," there are no pronouns at all from the peak to the end of the story, the last eleven sentences (37-48). All participants or props are referred to either by a noun or there is a null subject. "Tortoise and Spider" also has no pronouns in the last six sentences. This phenomenon is somewhat unusual among the stories, but must be considered as among the "bag of tricks" that a Koma storyteller has at his disposal to vary the texture of the tale. Having nouns rather than pronouns lends more of a sense of concreteness and vividness.

3.3.3 Switch to human pronouns

In "Hippo and Elephant," when the story is starting to reach its resolution (the hippo climbing out of the water to see who is at the other end of his rope), the pronouns use switch from the nonhuman pronoun ka 'it' to the human wʊ 'he', though the characters remain the same. This would have the effect of making the main characters more personal and perhaps more vivid. The other stories mainly use the human pronoun to refer to the animal characters, with the exception of "Spider and Monkey," which uses non-human pronouns almost exclusively.

3.4 Dialogue

Dialogue, in the form of direct quotations, plays an important part in heightening the vividness of the peak(s) of the story. This can be seen in "Spider and Monkey," where direct quotations are used in two ways: the spider asking his next intended victim to come see the beard, and the victim exclaiming out loud over the beard, resulting in blindness. Arguably the peak sentence of the whole story is sentence 45, where the frustrated spider shouts "Don't you see the beard?" with the result that the tables are turned and he himself becomes the victim.

"Hippo and Elephant" contains a more general sprinkling of direct quotations throughout the text, but the resolution of the conflict consists entirely of the hippo's speech.

3.5 Pitch and Amplitude Increase

A phenomenon that does not show on transcriptions of the oral folktales is the variation in pitch and volume over the course of the story. To quantify this,

each sentence was analyzed with the CECIL hardware and software package. The highest pitch and the biggest amplitude of each sentence were taken to be representative of the sentence. These were recorded and plotted against that sentence number. I will note two patterns here.

First, the initial sentence of a paragraph tends to be the loudest and highest-pitched. That is, as the speaker continues into the paragraph, his voice gets lower in volume and pitch.

Second, and more important for this study, there is an overall rise in volume as the story progresses, reaching a maximum when the monkey kills the spider in sentence 47. Less obvious, but still present, is an increase in pitch for the duration of the last episode, again reaching a maximum when the monkey kills the spider in sentence 47.

Thus there is a fair correlation between the phonetics of pitch and volume and the tension and peak episodes of the story.

4. Summary

Several devices have been identified that mark peak in Kɔnni narrative. These include a concentration of the particle dɪ 'then,' the verb hagɪ 'get up' and a concentration of other verbs, and null-subject clauses. Sometimes at peak there is a lack of pronouns altogether, or a switch from non-human to human pronouns. The use of dialogue is often more frequent at peak. Besides these lexical and grammatical features, analysis of a taped recording shows peak is louder and higher-pitched than the rest of the story.

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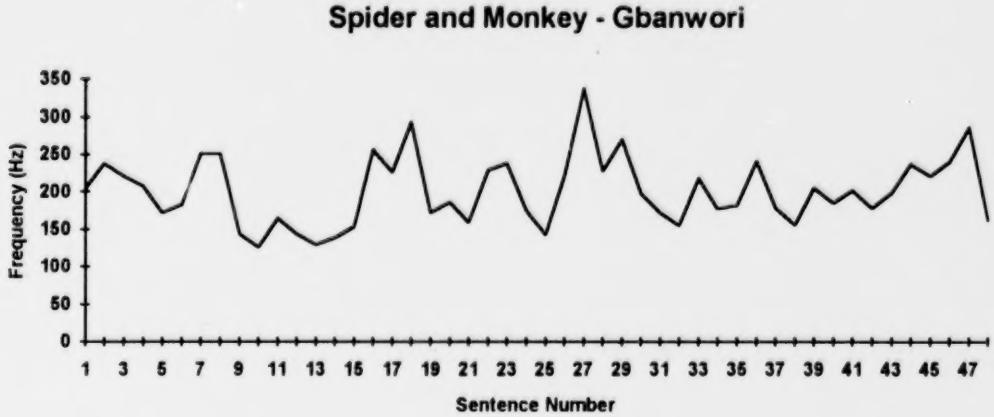
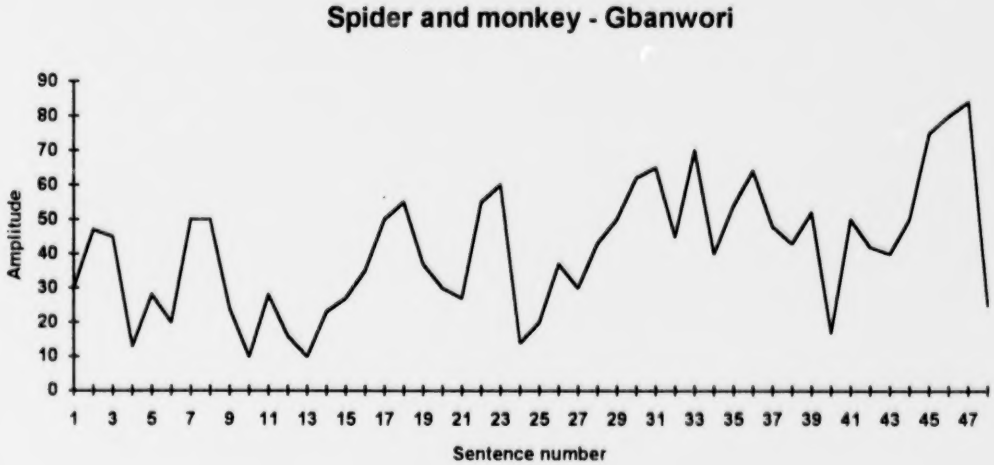
Graphs for text "Spider and Monkey"





MIKE CAHILL

THE SPIDER AND THE MONKEY

(a Kɔnni folk tale told by Gbuŋwuuri in Yikpabongo, Ghana)

Notes: Bold numbers in the text indicate new paragraphs, while space between sections indicates episodes or other major divisions. The gloss 'it' or 'its' below is shorthand for the 3rd singular non-human pronoun; similarly 'they' is shorthand for the 3rd plural non-human pronoun. Other abbreviations:

IMP	imperative mood	IMPF	imperfect aspect	NEG.FUT	negative future
OBJ	object pronoun	PERF	perfective aspect	PL	plural
SF	subject focus	TRANS	transitivity increaser	?	uncertain meaning

1) vii yiŋŋi zie. 2) m baa fi vii yiŋŋi zie re.
again turn stand 1s say 2s again turn stand like.that

3) ŋmɪndarɪŋ hagɪ-na 4) a gaa ka chɪa kpechuo-ti. 5) ka ga tʊg-a
spider get.up-SF and go it cut termite -PL it go reach-MPF

ta bitiemiŋ mʊʊna. 6) a zi-é. **7)** ka baa "woi! 8) bitiemiŋ brɪn-a
and beard like.this and stand-IMPF it say hey! beard grow-SF

mʊʊna?" 9) ta ŋmɪndarɪŋ kpigimam. 10) ka yɪɪn-ya. **11)** ŋmɪndarɪŋ
like.this and spider be.blind it be.blind-PERF spider

dɪ baa-rɪ dieniŋ ka kaan vii balɪ. 12) ta ke nin-e pol. 13) ka
then say-? if.so it NEG.FUT again tell and it eye-PL light it

naa yiŋŋi. 14) a naa kieŋ keŋ baa-ra kaŋ.
take turn and take come come meet-IMPF bush.horse

---

1) Wait and listen. 2) I say you should again listen.

3) Once upon a time, there was a spider. 4) It went looking for termites. 5) When it went, it saw a beard as big as this. 6) It was standing. **7)** It said, "Hey! 8) Has a beard grown so big?" 9) And spider became blind. 10) He became blind. **11)** Spider then said it wouldn't again marvel at the beard. 12) And it could see again. 13) It came away. 14) It got to the bush horse.

15) ka baa-rɪ "n zʋa kaŋ 16) kiere tɪ gaa gie." **17)** kaŋ
it say-? 1s friend bush.horse come.IMP 1p go here bush.horse

yaa ga nyɪn-nana 18) ta baa "bitiemiŋ mʋʋnaa?" 19) ta kpigimam!
have go out -EMPH and say beard like.this and be.blind

20) ŋmɪndarɪŋ dɪ-re dɪɪ ŋaa a nɪgɪ nɪgɪ ga kʋʋ. 21) a yaa
spider then-like.that follow ? and beat beat go kill and have

ken yɪɪ ka ŋaŋ ka hɔgʋ a chagɪ. 22) ke chii yaa ken tigiŋ miŋ.
come give it with it woman and satisfy it carry have come house TRANS

23) ka aŋ ka hɔgʋ aŋ ka ballɪ ba ŋwɔbɪ. 24) nɔŋ won-die.
it and it woman and it children 3p chew meat is-that

25) a chagɪ.
they satisfy

26) tʋn dɪ vʋŋ ka haa ga-ra ge yigi naagɪŋ. 27) "n zʋa ken tɪ
day that break it get.up go-IMPF go catch cow 1s friend come 1p

gaa gie." **28)** naagɪŋ yaa ga tʋg-a 29) woi dɪ bitiemiŋ mʋʋna.
go here cow have go reach-IMPF hey! it beard like.this

30) naagɪŋ yɪɪn-ya. **31)** ŋmɪndarɪŋ dɪ dɪɪ a nɪgɪ kʋʋ. 32) a
cow be.blind-PERF spider then follow and beat kill and

yaa kem ba ŋwɔbɪ.
have come 3p chew

---

15) It said, "My friend bush-horse! 16) Come and let's go to this place." **17)** The bush-horse got there 18) And he said, "What a big beard!" 19) And he became blind. **20)** Spider then beat it until it died. 21) And brought it (home) for it and its wife to eat their fill. 22) It carried it home. 23) It and its wife and children ate it. 24) This was meat (for them). 25) They ate their fill.

26) The following day it came across a cow. 27) "My friend, come and let's go see this place." 28) The cow reached there. 29) "Hey! A big beard!" 30) The cow became blind. **31)** The spider then beat it to death. 32) And took it home for their food.

33) tʊn vʊn-ya ka ẏaa ga tʊg-a ta ŋman-daaŋ. 34) ka baa "n
day break-PERF it have go reach-IMPF and? monkey -male it say 1s

zʊa ken tɪ gaa gie." 35) ka yaa ŋmaamɪŋ gaa 36) dʊ-ʊ gaa gie.
friend come 1p go here it have monkey go that-3s go here

37) ŋmaamɪŋ dɪ ga baarɪ naa ken tɪaŋ. 38) a yiŋŋi baarɪ
monkey then go go.round like.this come pass and turn go.round

naa ken tɪaŋ. **39)** ŋmɪndarɪŋ dɪ balɪ baa "daag gie. 40) bitieŋ-ke
like.this come pass spider then tell say pass here beard -the

won-naa. 41) daag gie." 42) ŋman-daaŋ ŋaan sɪba ta pal daag naa
is-this pass here monkey-male would know but really pass place

ken tɪaŋ. **43)** sinyiiriŋ dɪ yaa ge yigi ŋmɪndarɪŋ. 44) ŋmɪndarɪŋ dɪ
come pass. anger then have go catch spider spider then

natɪ wore: 45) "ke yie bitieŋ-ke?" 46) ta kpigimam. 47) ŋmaamɪŋ dɪ
shout loud NEG see beard-the and be.blind monkey then

yiŋŋi ge kieŋ a nɪgɪ kʊʊ.
turn go come and beat kill

48) ɪhɪɪ.
ok

---

33) The following day it came across a male monkey. 34) It said, "My friend, come, and let's see this place." 35) It sent the monkey. 36) That he should go there. 37) Monkey would go around and come back (to the same spot). 38) And then go a different way to come back (to the same spot). **39)** The spider showed him where to pass. 40) "There is the beard. 41) Pass here." 42) The male monkey would deliberately avoid the spot. **43)** Finally the spider got angry. 44) The spider then shouted, 45) "Can't you see the beard?" 46) Then he became blind. 47) The monkey then turned around and beat it to death.

48) You see?

THE HIPPO AND THE ELEPHANT

(a Kɔnni folk tale told by Gbuŋwuuri in Yikpabongo, Ghana)

1) yɔbiŋ. nyayiimiŋ. 2) nyayiiŋ-ku dɪ bie nyaan suŋ. 3) yɔbiŋ
elephant hippopotamus hippopotamus-the then exist water inside elephant

dɪ bie gaaŋ. **4)** suamiŋ. 5) ka haa naa guuŋ a ga yii nyayiimiŋ
then exist land rabbit it get.up take rope and go make hippopotamus

chiaŋ nyaan suŋ.
waist water inside

6) a yaa ken juali yii yɔbiŋ chiaŋ ta suuŋ bali nyayiimiŋ dɪ
and have come climb make elephant waist and come.down tell hippo that

jaaŋ be-ne gaam-ma. 7) a baa ka tian-na ka. **8)** nyayiimiŋ dɪ baa
thing exist-SF land-at and say it pass-SF it hippo then say

dɪ suagɪ. 9) jaan diɛŋ ben-nee? 10) aŋ sɪba maniŋ? 11) to nɪ waa
that wonders thing too exist-SF and like 1s.EMPH ok 2p then

nagɪ tamba ti yie. **12)** nyayiimiŋ dɪ suuŋ ga bie nyaan
take one.another 1p see hippopotamus then come.down go exist water

suŋ a die yali jigikiki keŋ keŋ keŋ... 13) ka ke jigisi-ye.
inside and then have (pulling) come come come it NEG budge-PERF

14) yɔbiŋ dɪ yiŋi ga zie. 15) suamiŋ dɪ yiŋi huri kem bali yɔbiŋ
elephant then turn go stand rabbit then turn hurry come tell elephant

sɪbaa, jaam be-ne nyaa-bu suŋ baa ka biagɪ fu. 16) yɔbiŋ dɪ
like thing exist-SF water-the inside say it able 2s.OBJ elephant then

tiaŋ juali zie gaaŋ a-riaŋ laarɪ yigi jigikiki keŋ keŋ keŋ.
pass climb stand land and-too begin catch (pulling) come come come

---

1) Elephant and hippo. 2) The hippo lived in water. 3) The elephant lived on land.

4) Rabbit. 5) It took a rope and tied it to the hippo's waist in the water.

6) It then climbed out, tied the rope to the elephants' waist, and came back to tell the hippo that there was a creature on the land. 7) And it said it was greater (than the hippo). **8)** The hippo said this was unbelievable. 9) Is there another creature living? 10) Like me? 11) Then put us to the test. **12)** The hippo went down into the water and pulled hard. 13) It did not budge.

14) The elephant went and stood. 15) The rabbit hurried back and told the elephant, "Do you know what? There is a thing in the water which says it is greater than you." 16) The elephant then stood on land and began pulling hard.

17) mii nyayiimiŋ dı ga nyıŋ nyaam ma a waa naa ken jʋala gaaŋ.
then hippo then go leave water at and then take come climb land

18) a dıı ree wʋ yaa ga tʋg-a ta yɔbıŋ zie dugukukuku.
and follow just 3s have go reach-IMPF and(?) elephant stand (big size)

19) wʋ baa dı n zʋa tı datı-naa tamba ree? 20) o, n zʋa ka
3s say that 1s friend 1p pull-SF one.another just oh 1s friend it

ka vıına. 21) tabaarı tieŋ. 22) wʋ naa ti yii tamba ma ree.
NEG good traitor owner 3s take IPL do one.another at just

23) ti vuo-kpıım-a be-lie. 24) wʋ naa ti yii tamba ma naa?
1p person-big-PL AGR-two 3s take 1p make one.another at like.this

25) vaa ta ka kpatı-ya miŋ.
leave and it finish-PERF TRANS

26) wʋ ga yii guum-bu fosi yɔbıŋ chıam ma. 27) yɔbıŋ dıaŋ dı
3s go make rope-the untie elephant waist at elephant too then

kieŋ ken yii guum-bu fosi nyayiimiŋ chıam ma. 28) tabaarı tieŋ
come come make rope-the untie hippopotamus waist at traitor owner

yi-ne ti ree.
make-SF 1p just

---

17) Then the hippo came up out of the water onto the land. 18) And he followed (the rope?) and reached the elephant, standing huge.

19) He said, "My friend, is it we who have been pulling each other?" 20) "Oh, my friend, that is bad." 21) "Treachery!" 22) "He has knocked our heads together." 23) "We two mighty people." 24) "He has knocked our heads together this way?" 25) "Forget it; this is the end."

26) He went and untied the rope from the elephant's waist. 27) The elephant then came and removed the rope from the hippo's waist. 28) It is the traitor who has done this to us.